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THE MUSICAL TIMES, And Singing Class Circular.

JULY 1, 1867.

THE MUSIC OF THE ENGLISH CHURCH.*

BY G. A. MACFARREN.

(Continued from p. 71.)

ONE further proposal let me offer as to a possible method for practically enforcing the performance of the Church Part by the members of the Church, the congregation that is, whose ritual duty, distinctly implied, if not authoritatively commanded in the rubric, is to sing this part. It might be, I believe would be, well, for the choir to sing in unison the Plain Song which belongs to the people, while the harmony was played upon the organ. The decision, firmness, and consequent distinctness of this disciplined performance, would, in a very large measure, compensate for the people's general ignorance of their proper part, and general inertness to acquire its knowledge, not to speak of their general inability to procure authentic and uniform copies of the same. Everyone knows the common tendency of untutored singers, of whatever vocal compass, to sing the top part of the harmony, rising to this as inevitably as oil in water rises to the surface, or rather, perhaps, reflecting it, between the nether harmonic strata, as the moon's figure is reproduced beyond the intervening atmosphere upon the ocean mirror. Not because it is the highest, but because it is the most prominent, does the top part of the harmony act thus magnetically upon the vocalisation of the multitude, or of such of them as are susceptible through a natural, but unschooled musical organisation, of its influence. The performance of the People's Part, in whatever pitch, by a unisonous trained choral body, would give to it the same prominence as its assignment to the highest voice in a piece of four-part harmony; nay, I may unreservedly say, that its prominence would in that case, be greater far, from the obvious fact, that in all musical combinations, any quality of tone which separates itself from the character of the sound or sounds by which it is accompanied is always paramount. The appeal to the voices of the congregation through their ears would thus be irresistible, and I may at once repeat and justify my supposition, that here would be a means of enforcing the people's adherence to the ancient Plain Song, since it is positively difficult for a non-musician, with a musical ear, to sing any other than the most conspicuous part, and since the multitude are willing enough to sing when they hear a sufficiently strong body of tone to support them. Where there is a way, in such matters, there is ever a will; each singer then gives confidence to the rest, and all, being assured of the notes they have to utter, are disposed to give them forth with boldness, frankness, heartiness, and clearness, that are incompatible with incertitude.

The proposal is offered with due regard for the custom in most cathedrals of singing the responses to

the preces, versicles, and litany, without accompaniment; and with due consideration of the beautiful musical effect which the unaccompanied voices of even our shamelessly reduced choirs produce. As for the custom, however, it is not universal; and, even in places where it generally prevails, it is not unexceptional. As to the musical effect, there can be no reason why another, equally beautiful, or more so, should not supplant it; especially as there may be other portions of the service in which this effect of unaccompanied vocal harmony, might appropriately be used. I suppose that these particular offices of prayer were designed to exercise rather the hearts than the minds of the people, rather their feelings than their intelligences; and I maintain that such exercise is not passive but active, not the operation of listening but of singing. Here then would be a moral as well as a musical effect; the spirit of the early Reformation days, and of those which went before them, would work again in the impulses of the people, and the grandly majestic sonority of the first church music to the English text, with the admirable accoustical phenomena which it illustrates, would be restored to the Church's service.

The present proposal refers to the purification of those portions of the ancient Plain Song which are generally assumed to have held a permanent place in our service, since Cranmer and his successors first adapted to them the text of the English liturgy. To pursue further the same view, it is desirable that this purified Plain Song should be sung by the people, whose proper part it is; and as a means of giving them certainty, and consequent confidence in its performance, it is desirable that the choir should support them by singing their part. The vastly extended resources of the modern organ, admirably fit this instrument to supply the effect of the extemporaneous descant of pre-Reformation times, and of the written vocal counterpoint that came into use together with the English language, in the Church service. It would, then, not be desirable to accompany the voice with the full power of the instrument, but with such a judicious choice of stops as might more or less characterise the changing sentiment of the words, but never produce a greater body of tone than would represent the proportion of the counterpoint of the choir against the *canto fermo* of the congregation. When the Plain Song was again rendered familiar, when the people had again acquired the practice of singing it, when they no longer needed the support of a trained choir in unison with them—a state of things that would, I fear, take the lifetime of at least one generation for its accomplishment; it would be well to return to the method of performance, discussed last month, with a firm belief in the excellence, the sublimity of its effect, the accompaniment of the congregation's unisonous singing by the harmony of the choir, without instrumental aid. Meanwhile the organ part might consist either of the harmony of Tallis, with the elimination of Barnard's additions and perversions, or of any of those forms of harmony the use of one of which on ordinary occasions is said to be peculiar to each of our cathedrals. A third alternative presents itself in the largely extended capabilities of modern organists, which would be aptly exercised in improvising, yes, or in studiously elaborating new harmonies to the Plain Song, supplying a new descant, whose construction would be guided by theoretical knowledge, instead of impelled by practical fancy; and this, could the invention of the or-

* Let me explain that in page 69, line 10, and in page 71, line 11, from bottom, of last month's number, the word "published," is intended to signify made public by performance, and by the extensive circulation of written copies. The harmony of Tallis to the Preces, &c., was first printed in the corrupt version of the Rev. John Barnard, 1641.

In page 70, column 2, line 3, for "either," read "however."

ganist be restrained within the imperative limits of appropriate simplicity, might invest the entire performance with an ever varying and ever increasing interest.

Something yet more is to be said as to the expediency, and something as to the highest antiquity of employing instrumental accompaniment in such situations as those in which it is here proposed to apply it. Instrumental accompaniment would prevent the choral voices from following the too frequently changing pitch of the intoning priest; and the maintenance of pitch by the organ and chorus would compel the return, after each response, of the intoning priest from his tonal aberrations; and the expediency of this would be proved as valuably in the practical convenience of the singers as in the musical effect. Then, as to the antiquity of instrumental accompaniment, the Greeks, from whom this portion of our Church music is derived, and the Romans, who followed in their footsteps, accompanied always their chorus upon the tibia, and their principal actors, nay, their orators, and all public recitation, either upon this instrument or upon the lyre. Were other proof wanting of such classical practice, of the importance attached to it, or of its supposed indispensability, the historical fact of Serpander's banishment would sufficiently testify to it; since he was expelled his country for adding three strings to the lyre, and so effeminating the effect of Greek oratory, by giving the means of supporting the voice of the reciter on a higher note than had been customary, and than was esteemed compatible with the manly dignity of the national character. It must surely be inconsistent, as it is doubtlessly a wanton multiplication of difficulties, to employ in our Church the ancient Greek musical system, and in some cases, I believe the very music of the Greeks, and to discard an essential and most necessary element in its performance.

It is next to examine the Chant, as the vehicle for the recitation of the prose version of the Psalms.

The Anglican Chant I believe to be more peculiarly individual to the English Church, and thus intrinsically more national than any other form of the Church's music. The individuality claimed for the Anglican Chant consists in the variety and changelessness of its rhythmical divisions; variety in the difference of the rhythmical closes of the first and second strains of the Chant; changelessness in the uniformity of all chants in these different closes. The indefinite repetition of the reciting note is, of course, the chief element of chanting. It is this which constitutes the availability of chanting for unmetrical sentences of indefinite length, and this is common to the Anglican, the Gregorian, and, let us infer, the Grecian forms of Chant. The Gregorian Chant, so far as I can learn, has no rule of construction to determine the number or measure of its introductory and closing notes in either of its strains, and thus essentially differs from the Anglican Chant.

I will leave to classical students and to philologists to demonstrate, what seems to be easily susceptible of proof,—the greater fitness to Latin verse and to English prose respectively, of the Gregorian and the Anglican forms of Chant. I affirm that they are essentially distinct, and have something to say in support of the special fitness of the latter form for English Church use. In music, two things present themselves to our comprehension—time and tune, rhythm and pitch. A musical phrase

is more than half made clear to the understanding, more than half imprinted upon the memory, when either its rhythmical or its tonal arrangement, especially the former, is comprehended. The changelessness of the rhythmical arrangement of our Chant is then a security for the prompt understanding of every specimen that may be offered to a singer or a hearer, who, knowing before hand the number and the relative length of its notes, all the more readily perceives their ascent, or descent, or repetition. Such prompt understanding of the melody itself induces the easy application of its notes to their appropriate syllables. The variety of the rhythmical arrangement gives interest and consequent impressiveness to this most concise form of composition, distinguishes the imperfect from the perfect cadence of the first and second strains, and gives elasticity and vigour to the character of the whole.

Be it admitted that the principle and the practice of Greek and Roman recitation has been handed down through Gregorianism to the use of the English Church; the Anglican Chant is nevertheless a thing quite peculiar in its form, and limitedly national in its use. I am well aware that the most popular of all Chants, that in F, ascribed to Tallis, is said to be an appropriation of the first Gregorian tone. I am aware too—and this is not universally known—that many of the earliest English Chants, possibly all which date before the Commonwealth, are more or less similar adaptations of fragments of Gregorian melody. Let it be noticed, however, how our English composers treated the Gregorian tones in appropriating them to national use. In the instance named above, several notes are omitted at the beginning, the first note is repeated, other omissions subsequently occur, and the close is modified by a like process. The following sentence,

"Her beauty hangs upon the cheek of night,
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear;"

might in like manner thus be condensed,

"Her beauty's like an Ethiop's ear;"

and declared to be the expression of Romeo's wondering rapture at his first sight of Juliet. There are truly more notes excised from the first tone than are preserved in Tallis's Chant, and those which are kept have their melodic effect so modified by their rhythmical definition and by their altered context, that the eye of the antiquary, rather than the ear of the general auditor, is necessary for their identification with the notes of the original. Moreover, Gregorianists protest that Tallis has perverted the character of this notable melody of three sounds, by neglecting to place it upon its "proper seat"—by harmonizing it, namely, according to the Lydian instead of the Dorian mode, its propriety to which latter being established by the omitted notes. It could scarcely be possible that any melody which moved no other interval than a second, and which comprised but three notes in its whole extent, should not correspond in sounds with some other, nay, many another melody; and when the main interest of the former consists in a rhythmical arrangement of its sounds which the latter does not possess, the argument must indeed be futile which would illustrate the merits of the one by the example of the other. Equally beside the purpose were it, to adduce the other rhythmized Gregorian fragments, to which reference has been made, as showing the fitness of this form of melody for English Church use; and many of them still more disclaim attention, since, according to

primitive practice, they present the melodious relic in the tenor part of the harmony, where it can never be distinguished in performance, and where it has frequently been mutilated or expunged by modern editorial privilege—the privilege of contorting a man's composition into the expression of the editor's ideas instead of his own. But most of the vestiges of Gregorian melody preserved in some of our Chants are but as the motto of a book, the text of a sermon, to the entire composition—so modified are they, so completely reorganised in their appropriated form; and, whatever may have been the design of the composers in adopting these ancient fragments as musical theses, it can no better be said of these musicians that they perpetuated the use of the Gregorian Chant in the English Church, than it can be said of those mediæval Romans who quarried the Coliseum for materials for their palaces, that they re-built the Flavian Amphitheatre.

One of the earliest acts of the English Reformation was to reject the Latin in favour of the native language of the people for the celebration of Church Service. Then followed the adaptation of the new text to the universally familiar music. Immediately afterwards, this music was invested with harmony, in accordance with the deep rooted natural predilection of the English nation, not then stifled by the foreign favouritism of foreign nurtured or foreign born sovereigns. Next in order, we had original compositions, of which it will hereafter be time to treat, of the longer and more continuous pieces of the service, discarding totally the ancient melodies. Together with these, was instituted a form of chant expressly suited to the vocal inflexions in reciting English, and happily fitted to the prosody of our language. In deference, as it should seem, to time honoured reverence, Tallis selected the notes of his chants from Gregorian melodies, as one might fancifully select the words of an aphorism from some well-known poem; but he so re-arranged these old notes, as to give them a new significance, and he selected only so many as fulfilled the rhythmical form which he seems to have instituted. Composers, editors, and publishers, more or less varied the notation of the chant, the present prevailing order of which was not established until the printing of Boyce's Cathedral Music, in 1760. It was common, for example, in the time preceding this publication, to write the chant in minims and crotchets, instead of in semibreves and minims, and to divide it into four bars, instead of into seven, terminating the first strain with the first note of the second bar, but not defining this termination by a double bar. Still, however variously noted, there can be no doubt that the chant was sung as we now sing and now hear it; and that the only exception from the universal use of the rhythmical form of chant, of which the one by Tallis, already noticed, is the earliest specimen, was the preservation in the time of Charles II, of the unharmonised Gregorian melody for the "Venite," which Marbeck set to this and all the daily psalms in the Morning and Evening Service. At what period the exceptional use of this one melody ceased, I cannot trace; I will not urge the general disrelish for such shapeless music which is shown by the cessation of its use; but I claim that having gone for generations out of use, to revive it would now be an innovation.

Disregarding the pagan origin of Gregorian music, disregarding its thoroughly popish associations, many persons claim for it toleration in the Church, and

consideration in criticism, on the ground that its effect is beautiful. While I cannot concur in the taste of such persons, I cannot combat their wish upon such ground to indulge it. It may be fair, however, to explore in what the beautiful effect consists which would justify the revival for standard use, of a system which is obsolete, and has been superseded. It cannot be in the vexatious vagueness of key, which, with all definiteness of tonality, takes away all satisfactoriness from a musical phrase, that this beautiful effect is found. It cannot be in the irregularity of rhythm, which deprives music of its chief stronghold upon the attention of the schooled and the unschooled, that this beautiful effect is felt. It cannot be in the insusceptibility of agreeable harmony, which robs music of its most powerful charm for the English ear that this beautiful effect is assumed. Let me pause to explain this last supposition. Certain exceptional fragments of the music in question have been admirably harmonised, whether by casting them down from their "proper seats," or otherwise as has been acknowledged throughout these remarks; but, to quote the greatest harmonist that has enriched our art with the products of his mighty genius, Bach's harmony of some chorales, which are in Gregorian modes, must prove to anyone, not a blind idolator of his writing, or of the themes he elaborated, that harmony to these said melodies militates against every principle of beauty.

The beautiful effect of Gregorian music as now presented in some of our Churches, I believe to consist totally in its being sung in unison by all the congregation. I have proposed to exhume from the tenor part of the score, or from whence soever they may lie buried, the Gregorian phrases proper to the service of the English Church, since permanent in their use, and to restore them to their grand, severe, unisonous magnificence. I have now to suggest that if this same imperious majesty of multitudinous unison be given to melodies which have integral beauty, and which—being formed upon natural scales—are susceptible of natural and therefore beautiful harmony. Such innate twofold beauty will produce a beautiful effect measurelessly surpassing the utmost that can be yielded by the vague incongruities of an age as ignorant of the natural principles of music, as it was master of those of the other arts, the age of Pythagoras and Phidias.

(To be continued.)

THAT persons should disagree upon matters of taste is scarcely to be wondered at, but that opinions should differ upon what are pronounced demonstrable facts, seems an anomaly almost too strange to be recorded as an existing truth. That such is the case amongst those who study the science of music, must, however, be freely admitted; and if it were not that the laws which regulate sound have been almost innately perceived and acted upon, by those whose mission it was rather to create than to investigate, we should certainly have had Beethoven suspending the composition of his immortal works, until he had satisfactorily determined the roots of all the chords he was desirous of using, and, perhaps, dying before he had accomplished his task. All respect, however, is due to those who step aside from the practical application of a science for the purpose of conscientiously inquiring into the natural laws by which it is regulated; and it will be assuredly conceded that if